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University of Montana–Missoula. Office of University Relations, "1978-79 University of Montana basketball outlook" (1978). *University of Montana News Releases, 1928, 1956-present*. 29403.
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406/243-2522

1978-79 UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA BASKETBALL OUTLOOK

by
Bob Rosenthal
Sports Information Director

Experience and depth on the front line are the main strengths of the 1978-79 University of Montana basketball team. First year head coach Mike Montgomery will have three experienced seniors and a junior to build on, but needs two guards to emerge from the shadows and step into the spotlight.

Returning for UM are senior forwards Allan Nielsen (6-6, 200), Craig Henkel (6-7, 205) and Charlie Yankus (6-6, 203). All three saw starting time last season and all are expected to make major contributions again this season. Nielsen averaged 12 points and 5.6 rebounds a game last season on the way to earning second team all-Big Sky honors. Henkel averaged 7.4 points and 6.3 rebounds, while Yankus averaged 5.2 and 3.6. Both Henkel and Yankus played most of the last half of 1978 with injuries.

Two fine sophomores will see quite a bit of playing time at forward. Rodney Brandon (6-6, 195) and Craig Zanon (6-6, 185) gained valuable playing time as freshmen last season and figure strongly into next season's plans. Montgomery hints that Brandon also might see some time at guard.

Junior center John Stroeder (6-10, 240) started every game last season and developed into an excellent big man. He averaged 10 points a game and picked off 6.8 rebounds a game. He is a definite offensive threat and clears the boards with authority. According to Montgomery, "Stroeder has begun to understand his role as a defender and intimidator." Stroeder earned second team all-Big Sky honors last season.

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Sophomore center-forward Marty Green (6-9, 190) could also see playing time in a reserve role. He has good offensive tools and according to Montgomery, will be given an opportunity to play as much as possible.

The backcourt presents the major problem for Montgomery. Gone are co-captains Michael Ray Richardson and Jim Molloy. Montgomery must find someone to assume Molloy's role as floor leader. It's doubtful if he can find anyone to fill Richardson's shoes.

"There is no way to tell yet how the loss of Michael Ray will affect us," Montgomery said. "No one really knows just how good he was. I'm sure though that others will emerge and take over the responsibilities shouldered by M.R."

Richardson, a 1977-78 All-American, averaged 24.2 points, 7 rebounds, and 4.3 assists a game last season.

Four returning guards will have immediate opportunities to win a position. Juniors Rick Zanon (6-0) and Tim McCauley (6-2), and sophomores Blaine Taylor (6-1) and Dennis Gay (6-2½) are all vying for starting positions. All four saw playing time last season.

Montgomery has also signed three outstanding high school ball players. Craig Larsen (6-10½, 205) from Aurora, Colorado, Dale Wiitala (6-4, 180) from Naselle, Washington, and Bill Crabtree (6-3, 185) from Lake Oswego, Oregon will be given an opportunity to play immediately for the Grizzlies. Wiitala and Crabtree will be used in the backcourt while Larsen will backup John Stroeder. Montgomery expects to sign one more high school senior this spring.

Montgomery, who became head coach in April when Jim Brandenburg accepted the head coaching position at Wyoming, believes that young players "thrive on responsibility. They will carry the load when asked." He expects the backcourt slack to be taken up by players in the program.

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